

McCALLIE

— HONOR TRUTH DUTY —



Michaels-Dickson Parent Speech

Michaels-Dickson Scholars Weekend
by Linda Ferri, mother of Marco Ferri '26
Friday, February 20, 2026

Good evening, and welcome Michaels-Dickson Scholar finalists and families. I am so very excited for each of you. My hope for these next two days is that you set aside the worries, calm the nerves, and simply be present because this will be a very special weekend.

In February of 2022, I was sitting exactly where you are now. Marco had attended the CLC Leadership camp the summer before 8th grade, and when we picked him up at the end of those two weeks, he confidently declared that he wanted to attend McCallie. My husband and I promised him we would do our due diligence, and later attended a Boarder Visitors Day in the fall.

It did not take long for us to understand what drew him to this beautiful school on Missionary Ridge. The school is very impressive. But what stood out most were the teachers, administrators, and the boys themselves. Their kindness and authenticity, along with the clear sense of purpose, felt different in the best possible way. And yet, one difficult question lingered...could we really send our son, our only child, 749 miles away at just 14 years old?

So we continued to visit other schools. Excellent schools. His middle school teachers reassured us, "Marco will be fine anywhere he lands." And while that was very comforting, I kept asking myself a deeper question: Is being just "fine" really the goal?

So, I tried to imagine Marco graduating from each of these schools. Who would he become? What values would ground him? At many schools, the vision was vague and the answer seemed to depend on chance, right??—who his friends would be, what activities he would join, and what influences would surround him. But with McCallie, something different happened. I could clearly envision 18-year-old Marco—and not just a young man in a blue and white striped tie.

I could see a young man who would be compassionate, resilient, and grounded. Someone who would embrace challenges, value meaningful relationships, and who had grown stronger academically, emotionally, spiritually, and physically. In that moment, I knew that here, he wouldn't just be "fine." He would thrive.

Now, as his senior year soon comes to a bittersweet close, I can say that he has not only become the young man I imagined that day... he is so much more. McCallie doesn't simply build impressive résumés. The young men in this room have remarkable accomplishments, but they are even more remarkable human beings. And that transformation is deeply connected to the culture here—a culture of good.

Before coming, I worried that a school full of high-achieving boys might feel intensely competitive. Instead, we found something far more powerful: a community where excellence and kindness coexist. The boys work hard, but they don't measure their worth against one another. I have watched friendships form that are rooted in genuine respect and love. When one boy succeeds, the others are proud. When one struggles, he is never left behind. Each boy is on their own academic path, carefully curated with his advisors and teachers. Boys are encouraged to broaden their experiences and do hard things. That kind of environment is rare, and it matters deeply for boys who are used to being driven and high-performing.

Because the truth is, high-achieving boys will likely succeed anywhere. But perhaps the more meaningful question we should ask is: Where will they learn that their value is not tied solely to outcomes, but to effort, integrity, and how they treat others along the way? At McCallie, we found the answer. And over time, we saw our son's confidence become steadier, and his motivation become more self-driven rather than externally pressured. That shift—from achievement for validation to growth with purpose—has been one of the most beautiful parts of this journey to witness as a parent.

One of the most transformative aspects of this journey has been the boarding life itself. Six weeks into Marco's first year, during Parents Weekend, Bart Wallin suggested we ask our sons one question when they came home for fall break: "What has surprised you most about yourself since coming to McCallie?" I will never forget his answer. He said, "I'm surprised I can do so many things for myself, because you used to do so much of them for me." So empowering!

The dorm faculty, whom we now consider extended family, have guided him with the perfect blend of warmth and high expectations. They cared for him in ways we simply couldn't from nearly 800 miles away in Fort Lauderdale, Florida.

The teachers and coaches at McCallie—many of whom live on campus—became some of the most influential adults in Marco's life. Their impact stretches far beyond the classroom. They taught him how to think critically and pursue excellence without perfectionism. These are men and women who don't just teach—they invest. They show up at games, know each boy's strengths and struggles, and model daily what moral, humble, purposeful adulthood looks like.

And the friendships...where do I begin? These boys don't just live together; they grow up together. Over time, friendship becomes brotherhood. In a world filled with social media and peer pressure, I can confidently say Marco is a better person because of his McCallie brothers—and I hope they're a little better because of him, too.

One aspect that is often underestimated but has been incredibly impactful is the all-boys environment. McCallie is designed around how boys learn and develop. You can see this in the intentionally-selected book lists and class projects. By removing many of the social pressures that can exist in a co-ed setting, boys are freer to be themselves. They are more willing to raise their hands and participate openly in class. The result is authentic confidence... the kind that comes from being seen and valued.



At the heart of all of this is something even more profound: the Honor Code. Honor. Truth. Duty. These values are lived daily. Integrity is expected in simple, everyday moments. The boys learn that doing the right thing is not about recognition, but about responsibility.

As our Head of School, Lee Burns once said, “In a world with so many pressures to achieve and get ahead, it can be hard to remain truthful. It’s common to think that honor is outdated, a quaint notion from a simpler time. It’s common to think that the only duties we have are to ourselves, to our own happiness and successes, to our own story. That, though, is not the McCallie way. We are uncommon.” I love that quote. For me, it truly captures the spirit of this place.

I would be remiss if I didn’t share one more unexpected and deeply meaningful gift: the parent community. Without the parents we’ve met here, these past 4 years would have been far more difficult. The sincerity and genuine connection among Michaels-Dickson families have enriched my life in ways I never could have anticipated. There is an immediate sense of understanding because we are all walking through this same journey together. Our boys are here for your boys, and we are here for you. What you find at McCallie is not only a brotherhood among the students—it becomes a true parenthood among the families.

I won’t pretend that drop-off day in August 2022 was easy. As we said goodbye, Marco gave us a big hug, asked me not to cry, and very matter-of-factly said, “I’m going to find out what we’re doing for the rest of the day.” As we stepped out of his dorm room, my husband and I walked in one direction, and Marco walked in the other. I remember turning back for one last glimpse, wondering if he would look back, too. Our last image of him that day was of this 14-year-old boy bouncing down the hallway, excited to begin his McCallie journey—and no, he didn’t look back.

In that moment, I realized something important. This place doesn’t just welcome boys—it launches them. Even on day one, he wasn’t clinging to what he was leaving behind. He was already stepping into who he was becoming. When I look at him now, with immense pride, the growth is unmistakable. He has learned to lead without being loud, to listen without needing to impress, and to be comfortable in his own skin. Quite honestly, he teaches me how to be a better person every day.

We would not be here if not for the generosity of McCallie and the Michaels-Dickson Scholarship. We will be forever grateful for those who saw something special in our son before he even recognized it in himself.

Four years ago, I sat exactly where you are now, wondering if we could take this leap. Today, I can tell you two things with absolute certainty:

1. This was the greatest emotional sacrifice I have ever made. And...
2. It was the single best decision we have ever made for our son—and for the man he is becoming.

I wish you all a wonderful weekend.
Take it all in, trust what you feel, and enjoy every single moment.